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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES HAMAS VISIT, SYRIA, AND IRAQ
WITH DFM SALTANOV

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4(B & D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Deputy Foreign Minister Saltanov told the Ambassador February 27 that the MFA saw Hamas as evolving in its views on Israel following a February 26-27 Moscow visit by Hamas Politburo Chief Mishal. While Mishal was not willing to directly address publicly the question of recognizing Israel, Saltanov was encouraged by positive steps in that direction in private meetings. According to Saltanov, Mishal had told FM Lavrov that Hamas saw the Mecca Agreement as opening the path to negotiations with Israel. Saltanov said Russia believed that an end to the "blockade" on assistance to the Palestinians would be a necessary part of supporting the National Unity Government. Moscow had coordinated its invitation to Hamas with Abu Mazen, but the Israelis continued to be critical of Russia's engagement. The Ambassador pressed Saltanov on Russian weapons sales to Syria and Iran and Saltanov responded by claiming that Russian end-user controls had been tightened. Putin's trip to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia had been marked by consensus on regional political issues and heightened interest in energy cooperation. End Summary.

HAMAS VISIT

¶2. (C) A four-member Hamas delegation led by Politburo Chief Khaled Mishal met February 27 with Russian FM Lavrov, following a February 26 meeting with DFM Saltanov. No other meetings with Russian officials, including President Putin, are planned. Saltanov told the Ambassador that the GOR had a positive impression after the meetings and saw Hamas' position on peace with Israel as "evolving." Saltanov did not exclude that Hamas might continue to make sharp statements publicly, but at least privately there were positive signs. Mishal told the Russians that he viewed the February 8 "Mecca Agreement" on a National Unity Government (NUG) as an opening which could lead to a path of negotiations with Israel because the Agreement provided a platform for such talks.

¶3. (C) Saltanov said the MFA pressed Mishal for clarity on "the most important question -- was Hamas prepared to recognize Israel." Mishal would not directly answer, but he underlined that Hamas was willing to accept the Arab League's 2002 Beirut Summit decision that promised normal relations with Israel as well as UN Security Council resolutions that implicitly recognized Israel. Pressed by the Ambassador as to whether Mishal was willing to express such views publicly, Saltanov counseled patience and again underlined that Hamas was evolving but was not likely to recognize Israel directly so soon after the Mecca Agreement. This would be a careful process, but Hamas would be moving forward, if by small increments. (NOTE: In a February 27 press conference, Mishal would not respond directly to a question on whether Hamas would recognize Israel.)

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QUARTET CONDITIONS

¶4. (C) Referring to the "blockade" on assistance to the Hamas-led government, Saltanov relayed Mishal's belief that implementation of the Mecca Agreement should be sufficient to allow the resumption of aid to the Palestinian Authority. Saltanov noted that Russia's views on ending the assistance ban paralleled the views of the seven Muslim like-minded countries who met in Pakistan on February 25; in Russia's view, relaxation of the ban depended in the first place on Hamas fully honoring the Mecca Agreement and working with Abu Mazen to establish the NUG. According to Saltanov, Mishal had promised that Hamas would be "non-discriminatory" in forming a government and would seek out "internationally recognized persons." Further Russian aid to the Palestinians would be held in abeyance, according to Saltanov, who stressed his hope that the Europeans would be able to further refine the temporary international mechanism at a March 13 Brussels meeting.

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COORDINATION WITH ABU MAZEN AND ISRAEL

¶5. (C) Saltanov said that Russia had been encouraged by PA President Abu Mazen to pursue continued engagement with Hamas. Abu Mazen was pleased by Moscow's support for the Mecca Agreement. The Israelis (with whom Saltanov met in Jerusalem last week before the Hamas invitation was made public) continued to be critical of Russia's approach. Saltanov said the Israelis were unrealistic about what Hamas would be willing to do in the immediate aftermath of the Mecca Agreement. In his view, the Israelis were making a

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serious mistake by not recognizing the dangers of the situation, not only on their borders, but in the broader Middle East. Saltanov did note that the Russians had acted on an Israeli suggestion to use their influence with Hamas to urge a reduction in violence and had pressed Hamas on Kassam rocket attacks.

¶6. (C) Saltanov said Russia strongly supported the Secretary's efforts to encourage talks between PM Olmert and

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Abu Mazen. Moscow saw it as a success that the two met at all, and that they had agreed to meet again. Saltanov briefly noted that the question of the Israeli soldier held prisoner by Hamas remained outstanding. He said Lavrov had pressed Mishal on this issue, but had been careful not to get into the details, so as not to obstruct the effort of Egyptian Intelligence Chief Omar Soliman.

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SYRIA

¶7. (C) Saltanov told the Ambassador that both Mishal and Abu Mazen had contended to the Russians that Syria was playing a helpful role in encouraging the Mecca Agreement and forming the NUG. The Ambassador emphasized the dangers to regional stability of Russian weapons sales to Syria (and Iran), noting outstanding U.S. concerns and pointing to Congressman Lantos' focus on this issue in all his meetings during last week's visit. Saltanov did not directly defend the sales, but said that Russia had put better end-user controls in place, and would welcome any concrete information that such controls were not be followed.

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IRAQ

¶8. (C) Saltanov was aware of the mid-March subministerial conference in Baghdad of Iraq's neighbors and P-5/G-8 members, but had not yet received an invitation from the

Iraqis. Russia had long supported such a conference; it would not only allow increased international support for the Iraqi government, it would also provide an opportunity to engage with Syria and Iran on Iraqi security.

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PUTIN IN THE GULF

19. (C) Saltanov, who had accompanied President Putin during his mid-February visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan, said that the meetings in Riyadh had been particularly useful. The Saudis had offered their strategic perspective on the region and both Moscow and Riyadh shared the view that more needed to be done to resolve regional conflicts. Much of the discussions in Qatar and Saudi Arabia had been focused on energy, but there had been no concrete projects agreed to in the leaders' talks. However, a parallel business forum had spurred discussions on bilateral investments and joint projects in third countries. Saltanov also noted continuing interest in the Gulf (and in Egypt) in developing peaceful nuclear energy programs.

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